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# THE ETHICAL AWAKENING

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## A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY, APRIL 15, 1894

BY

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"Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will found my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." — MATT. xvi. 18.

"The law and the prophets were until John: since then the kingdom of God is preached, and every man is pressing into it." — LUKE xvi. 16.

Scripture passages to be compared: Mark viii. 27-30; Luke ix. 18-22; Matt. xvi. 13-20; vii. 13-27; xxiii. 1-7, 13, 14, 23-28.

IN reading our brief, fragmentary, sketchlike, anonymous biographies of Jesus, in which the effects on their material, by transmission through many hands and many years, are so plainly visible, it is entirely obvious that the individual must often form his own judgment as to whether particular acts or words ascribed to Jesus are authentic.

This is no loose or capricious principle. It implies only what is strictly the fact; namely, that our knowledge of Jesus is of such a character that, in matters of detail, *nothing* can be dogmatically asserted. We do not possess testimony such as, in minor particulars of the story, makes an authoritative verdict possible.

A gracious, impressive figure looms through the mists of nineteen centuries. Its outline, its principal lineaments, are sufficiently distinct. They are unmistakable. Of the broad features of Jesus's character, of the burthen of his thought and preaching, of the chief events of his life, there is no reasonable doubt. But, as I say, incidental particulars cannot be insisted on. It is now impossible scientifically to prove their authenticity, or, perhaps, to disprove it. All we can do is to compare such details with the characteristics of the ideal which we have individually framed of Jesus,—with his personality as he stands before our several minds,—and

test them by that. If an act, a word, is clearly inconsistent with that personality or ideal, we have to reject it.

Not that we may idealize Jesus at will, creating a figment, and rejecting from it every trait which would modify it contrary to an arbitrary preconception, or attributing to it elements which should defend it from mature and scholarly criticism. But when careful study of the accounts we have, comparison of part with part, of one authority with another, of one version of a story with another, has issued in a well-considered result, this properly becomes the standard by which we judge particulars. While even the leading features of Jesus's character may not be, at all points, beyond critical question, it is hardly possible that we have not a general knowledge of him which is substantially accurate.

Yet even this broad result, although tolerably uniform, will be an individual one; and, as our general conception of Jesus will thus vary, within limits, so we shall judge differently in respect to the probable authenticity of certain details. You may admit some things which to me seem incredible. I may so understand some of his sayings that I can believe he uttered them, and you cannot.

On the whole, this state of things is a wholesome one. We are led to study more critically and thoughtfully. We are defended from the possibly unfavorable influence of a standard which might too readily become — as, perhaps, the conventional Jesus has actually become — a burthen upon the free action of our minds.

The saying ascribed to Jesus, which I quote as the first part of my text, I can with difficulty suppose he ever uttered. The story with which it is connected appears in each of the first three Gospels; and, by comparing it in its three forms, you see how it grew under transmission. The belief that a remarkable man was some great one of the past, revived, was common. The inquiry of Jesus as to what the people were thinking of him was artless, and not, perhaps, unworthy of him in a confidential mood. That it may have been responded to by his disciples, especially by the

ardent Peter, with an eager profession of faith in him as the Messiah, is wholly credible. But the alleged response of Jesus, as we have it in the elaborated tradition preserved by Matthew, is to me incredible. It does not consist with what seems to me most assuredly true of him, his ideas, his spirit, his aims. It does not *sound like* Jesus. Compare it with the Beatitudes! with his answer to the wife of Zebedee, when she asked thrones for her sons in his kingdom! It has a worldly, ambitious ring. It is far more at home, there where you have seen it, on the interior dome of that huge, pretentious basilica of St. Peter at Rome than on the lips of Jesus. In fact, it sounds so *modern*, if I may say so, that I can hardly see how it ever got into Matthew's Gospel. There is no act ascribed to Jesus, not even the somewhat shadowy sending out of the seventy disciples, that at all carries out the boastful purpose intimated in these words.

The case is very different with the idea and the phrase contained in the second part of my text. The thought is one strictly consistent with all the thought of Jesus. It is like him; it is worthy of him; it is characteristic of him and his work. The phrase is no solitary expression; it recurs continually in the Gospels, at least in the first three. It is one token of the late date and diverse origin of the Fourth Gospel that, in that, the phrase "kingdom of God" occurs only twice.

In the others, remark how often we find it.

In Matthew, "kingdom of God," six times; "kingdom of heaven," twenty-seven times. In Mark, "kingdom of God," thirteen times. In Luke, "kingdom of God," thirty times. Seventy-six times in all!

In fact, as the phrase thus occurs everywhere, the idea is characteristic of Jesus. It was his comprehensive thought. It sums up the work he aimed to do.

Jesus did not undertake to found a church. The church which has been called "Christian" (not from his own name, but from a title which visionary men gave him, and which unfortunately persists) was not founded by Jesus, nor in-



tended, nor foreseen by him. It was founded by Paul, a glorious man,—grandest, I am tempted to call him, of all the disciples of Jesus even to this day,—but a man of very different character, temper, ideas, and aims from Jesus, and spiritually inferior to him,—a man inclined to dogmatism and a born organizer. Yet even Paul, or Peter either, would have stood aghast at a papacy. And I cannot even imagine what those men would have made of the Nicene Creed or Calvin's Institutes!

What Jesus tried to inaugurate was something far higher, broader, deeper, in all things grander, than that which arose and connected itself with his personality; something in which we can all sympathize; which, in every country, for every race, in every time, is the normal, obvious ideal for humanity to strive after.

Jesus aimed, not at organizing a church,—the narrow, exclusive, unspiritual, worldly thing we have seen,—but at *redeeming society* by bringing all men under the influence of one comprehensive principle, in which religion, morality, and civilization are embraced, and of which progress is a necessary condition,—the principle of truth to the ideals of our nature. But this he did not leave an abstraction. He gave to it the warmth of feeling by the large and personal way in which he interpreted and expressed it. He called the state of things to which he urged men "the reign of God" in the world, the "kingdom," the realization, "of heaven" upon earth. Thus, I say, he made morality and civilization religious. He impressed on all parts of life the sanctity, and infused the cheer, of relation to an ideal Being as well as an ideal law.

A perfect society, I say, was the aim of Jesus.

What aim could be higher, what purpose broader, than that? For a little while his followers retained some vision of this ideal. Then it flickered, and went out. Selfishness, fostered by false, pagan ideas of their relation to God, diverted men's minds to what has been called the "salvation of their souls"—from future penalty, that is, not to actual

holiness. Worldly pride came in, and the love of power. Jesus's ideal, his aim, the spirit of his work, were lost sight of.

The reign of God in the world ; the realization here of heaven ; that state of things in which every act of every man, every thought, and every word shall be governed by truth, shall be perfectly in accord with ideal goodness,—as we say, “with the will of God,” which is only the expression of truth and goodness,—this was the aim which Jesus presented to men, the vision he saw, and held up before them.

How thoroughly practical, my friends, as well as beautiful ! It is merely the conception of a world in which all men shall be perfectly good, true, pure, kind, unselfish, loving. Is that not practical ? Why should we all not be perfectly good ? Why should not all be as good as some ? We all might be if we would ! We shall some day, when we understand the matter. There is no more reason that the Beatitudes should not be realized in human characters than that the Ten Commandments should not be obeyed.

Jesus's aim is wholly practical. It is the end of human life, toward which all mankind, all the world, is tending. “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together,” says Paul, “waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God” ; that is, for men to show that they are sons of God,—to show forth the divineness of their nature, to realize the ideals of humanity.

It is certain that the principle on which the whole universe is founded, and which it expresses, is development, progress. This would be a futile, phantasmal thing if the logical result—ideal perfection—were impracticable and visionary.

We cannot admit this. Then the aim offered to men, to promote the result, to labor together for a perfect state of things, is practicable, reasonable, hopeful. It is the one comprehensive aim which we all ought to recognize and cherish, and be working for. To make the world right in everything ! A large intention, but, I say once more, a wholly practical one !

This way of looking at life is, by the way, much more inspiring than that of moral *law*. To be always thinking what is "right," what you may do, what you may not do,—this has a tedium in it. To be doing good, to be curing the ills of life, to be improving the world, bringing on an ever-happier, fairer, safer day, is cheering, inspiring. It takes one out of himself, and *dedicates* him. And that is the greatest blessing and joy that can possibly come to a man.

The principles of the kingdom of God, of a perfect social state, are obvious. They are two:—

The first is mutual good will, what the Gospels call "love," what the modern philosopher likes to call "altruism."

This only means that each man, instead of living for himself, lives for all, for the world. One chief way of serving the world is to make yourself all you are individually capable of being; to be diligent in your own business; for the best contribution which a man can make to the general weal is usually the fulfilling of his own function, his own office. But this may be done, and should be done, in the same liberal, "altruistic" spirit, with the thought of one's vocation as his contribution to the general welfare.

It is this first principle—love, mutual service—which makes of a multitude a society.

But the second principle is equally essential. It is the recognition of an ideal. That is, all together must be working toward the perfect aim. We must all together expect, intend and labor to make human life, our own characters, our common institutions, perfect. We must agree that everything in us and in our lives shall be governed by the ideal truth, which is the ideal right. What this is in form is not always, if ever, to be defined by us or foreseen. It is a vision, the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day. But it is summed up for us, it is present and held before us in the infinite type of goodness, the character of God, with its felt but inconceivable perfections. The reign of God in the world is the accepted, established influence of the perfect ideal.



Once more I say that to labor for this result is wholly practical. I will not stand here and permit the least scepticism of it. If this aim is not practical, then not human life only, but human existence, would be a futility. God would be a mockery.

But I do not overlook how far we are from the result. In some lights, our progress appears, indeed, small. If you let your gaze linger on the evils of society, it sometimes seems as if the world had grown little better since Jesus wept over Jerusalem or Juvenal satirized the vices of Rome. Our politics are as corrupt as those of that ancient republic and empire. Our public men are as venal, mean, contemptible as hers, only lacking the audacity and violence of her Sullas, Mariuses, and Cæsars. The miseries of our people seem almost as great. Our millionaires may not so directly oppress the poor; but, when they wreck a railroad, they devour widows' homes quite as effectually as the Pharisees did. In our great cities human beings, by the hundred thousand, are packed into reeking tenements as densely as ever they were in mediæval walled towns, and the necessities of life are probably harder for them to get. I read the other day that in this happy city of our own, city of homes, there are nearly four hundred of what are called, only too realistically, "sweating-shops." You know, perhaps, what horrors are implied in the term,—not realized in all cases, perhaps, but approached. In some instances, the horrors of a Georgia rice-swamp have been equalled, in these dens, in contrasted forms of oppression.\* In the largest city of this country, it is said, on the best authority, that there are forty thousand women who live by their own shame. Six times as many

\* Before the Congressional Commission, in 1892, an expert testified that fully half of the ready-made clothing manufactured in Philadelphia, is made in rooms not over eighteen by twelve feet square, in which an average of twenty men are huddled. During two periods of four months each, annually, these men work continuously sixteen hours a day *seven* days in the week. Women and children are usually found working with the men, the same hours. The sanitary conditions, plumbing, etc., are apt to be extremely bad. Philadelphia was testified to be the worst of American cities in this matter. See Congressional Report, Committee on Manufactures, 1892; Report of Factory Inspector, Pennsylvania, for 1893.

men share the pollution, but escape the penalty. I do not suppose the proportion of either was greater in Pompeii before Vesuvius hid its profligacies out of sight.

These are only random examples, hints of the evil features of our civilization. Might not the modern picture have been fairer? Might not the ills of life have been more largely purged away?

I think they might. I think, friends, they would have been if the Christian world had not early gone off upon a false scent,—seeking a cheap and easy satisfaction of man's unceasing desire of standing right with the Power that rules the world, instead of being held by its teachers and its conscience to the only one which is practicable, that of actual conformity of character and life to truth and right.

Suppose that, instead of the endless, idle, vain discussions of metaphysical notions to which the leaders of Christendom have given themselves for eighteen hundred years, all that energy of mind had gone to urging on men the necessity, dignity, happiness, and safety of *goodness*. Suppose that all the teachers of religion had taught it, as Jesus taught it, as a practical rule of daily life; had held every man up to Jesus's simple law,—to be as good as he could, and do all the good he could. Suppose they had treated all mere professions of belief as contemptuously as he did when he declared of some effusive professors that he “never knew” them, and bade them depart “that worked iniquity”; that is, who did things which were bad.

Had all this been, my friends, we should have a very different world about us from what we see now. Of course, we should! It stands to reason.

Long-continued pressure has its effect. Constant dropping wears the stone. Had moral goodness and serviceableness, not doctrinal correctness, been men's aim; had they striven to perfect society, not to maintain a doctrinal system, the task would have been harder, very likely; but it would not have been unsuccessful.

Even as it is, there has been great progress. Hateful

facts, like those I referred to, are facts, alas! But there is another side to the picture. Vice and cruelty are not nearly so flagrant in civilized communities as they once were. They skulk and try to hide themselves, for the most part. They try to mask themselves, to deceive men by parading virtues alongside. It cannot be doubted that there is a better understanding of what virtue demands than there was, not merely in ancient times, but even a century or two ago. Read the social history of our own English race. Compare the condition of the people in Great Britain in the seventeenth century and at present. In some respects they were a happier people; "merry England" the country used to be called. But it was largely a childish, half-animal happiness. How coarse their manners! What cruelties lingered! How vicious the men! How unrefined the women! Read any of the early English novels, and observe the almost uniform tenor of the plot,—the assault by one sex on the virtue of the other. Recall the common amusements,—bear-baiting, prize-fighting, cock-fighting, single-stick, even the brutal tournaments on which the women loved to look, as they still do on a bull-fight in Spain. Read an account of a theatrical performance in Shakspere's time. Here is an incident which I chanced to note the other day. In the market-place of a country town there used to be what were called "baiting-posts." They may still be seen here and there. They were designed to tie poor beasts to, for dogs to worry before they were killed, with the view of making their flesh tender.

The religion of those days, at least with the common people, was a gross superstition, in which saints, witches, goblins, ghosts, and the devil played the leading part.

Certainly, we have advanced greatly. The same general system of doctrinal theory rests heavily upon the world's mind and heart; but, in effect, it is greatly relieved. Its details are modified. Its accompanying superstitions are largely cleared away. Its humane element is now becoming its prominent, influential element. The moral standard is

to-day distinctly higher. Humanity and charity have made vast progress. Slavery is done away throughout the civilized world. If vice and cruelty linger, as linger they do, and widely, they yet are largely stamped as such. Public sentiment abhors them; not always consistently, indeed, but whatever is identified as vicious or cruel good people generally condemn. Tradition is becoming a feeble bulwark for abuses. The standards of virtue begin to be equally applied to all classes and to both sexes. The time is visibly near when a vicious man will be ostracized as rigidly as a shameless woman.

It is well worth while to note that these moral improvements are at least coincident with the enfranchisement of the intellect. The Protestant Reformation, beginning as a moral uprising, was equally and at the same time a revolt of the intellect against enthrallment. In form it substituted one mode of bondage for another,—for a pope, a Bible. But it placed the Bible in the people's own hands; and, unconsciously, in so doing it yielded the principle of authority in belief. There could be no true orthodoxy in a body which was immediately split up into innumerable sects, or, rather, in a multitude which was never and could not be reduced to organic unity; which never had a central seat of authority, with power to enforce uniformity. Protestantism was a great heresy from the only genuine orthodoxy, and its own claims to authority were only those of a miscellaneous assemblage of parties, independent and often discordant. Agreement on main points gave this congeries of sects an effective unity, which has lasted long, and is still influential; but this has been steadily circumscribed and narrowed in scope, while in late days there has become clearly visible the growing sense of the very limited importance of all human opinions as compared with active goodness.

This is the spirit of the present day. And this, friends, is the change for which the religious world has been waiting, I may say, these eighteen centuries. The blight which, at its very proclamation, fell on the inspiring aim of Jesus, as



late frosts blast the tender greenery which balmy airs have tempted forth, is beginning to be redressed. At last the voice of Jesus is beginning to be heard above the angry din of councils and the strident intonings of the creeds. At last the simple, natural, practical proposition which that solitary reformer so long ago offered to his countrymen begins to recommend itself to the world of sixty generations later. For the first time since the third century, if not still earlier days, there is a prospect that men will take up the simple thought of making the world good by being good and doing good. To-day, it seems to me, as never before, it begins to be true that the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, is at hand; at hand, at least in this,—that the idea of it has taken possession of our generation, and the realization of it will proceed with accelerating speed. The way will be long still; but the dawn is on the hill-tops, and by and by it will be high noon.

The characteristic of our modern age, on this side, is the awakening of the ethical and humanitarian idea and sentiment. I need hardly call your attention to phenomena which are patent and abundant. Sectarianism, doctrinalism, linger widely, and still coerce men; but the effective social forces of to-day are the moral and the philanthropic.

Not that these have ever been absent from Christian civilization. Even the Roman Church has always had her charities, and noble ones. But the humanitarian forces have never been the characteristic and controlling ones in Christendom. They have always been subordinated to her doctrinal system and its necessities.

Neither is it to-day that these forces began to come to the front. They have been gathering head for generations. Witness the journeys of John Howard throughout the prisons of Europe; the labors of Elizabeth Fry in a similar field; the great temperance uprising of a half-century ago, with the mission of Father Mathew and the Washingtonian revival; presently that gigantic effort of philanthropy, so strikingly successful, the anti-slavery crusade in Great

Britain and in this country. All these were but signs of a gathering flood, symptoms of the ethical awakening which now, in Protestant countries, and especially in England and America, expresses itself in a seething activity for the betterment of society, for the installation of truth and right as the governing principles of human relations and institutions ; literally, for the establishment of the reign of God among men.

Stop but a moment, and call up a vision of the innumerable agencies and plans of to-day for the redress of evils, the reform of customs, the purification and elevation of life in all its parts.

It would be difficult to think of an important moral principle which is not at present expressed in some form of practical organization. It would be difficult to name a social ill which somebody is not laboring earnestly to cure. Our country is full of political corruptions and abuses, as we have noted ; but how many associations are actively working to correct each of them ! Every phase of possible improvement, every remotest conception of better social, civic, educational, financial, hygienic methods, incites some one to exertion, and calls sympathizers around him. The balance of social life begins to be rectified by the coming forward of women in all these fields. An imperious demand of the public conscience is calling on them to help in the regeneration of society, and they are showing themselves possessed of abundant capacity to answer the demand. The twentieth century will see the distinction of sex eliminated from our political institutions, as fully in form and far more completely in fact than those of race have already been.

In a word, as the early generations of Christendom, in the Hellenic lands, responded by a quick instinct to intellectual ideas, and thus we have had the vast, intricate, abstruse dogmatic system of Christianity, this age is responding to moral and philanthropic ideas. Ethics and humanity are at the front, as elements of religion or apart from recognized religion.

Why should not these ideas go on to fruition? Why should not this great movement of mind and heart develop results as marked and extensive as Christian doctrinalism did?

There is no reason. The truths on which they are based are profoundly rooted in the constitution of humanity. They have all the forces of God behind them. Love is a principle more potent than belief, or even faith. And this seems to be its day.

We cannot forecast the future; nor can we hope that any human movement should proceed without vicissitudes. But in this we may rejoice,—that our race is beginning, at least, to set its face in the right direction. Superstition will abide long, creeds will endure long, the men of belief will shrink and warn; but the great thought of Jesus is becoming an operative force,—the thought of organizing the perfect, the ideal truth into all the affairs of human life. This is the form religion is beginning to assume. If nothing cataclysmic occurs to crush and destroy the vigor of the races of Christendom, I see not why we may not have before us nineteen centuries of this religion,—the true Christianity; and, if nineteen, then—I will trust the after time.

But, my friends, let us remember one thing. It is a tendency of the mind of imperfect men to proceed by reactions, as the pendulum swings. Preoccupation with a new idea is apt to disparage or hide, partly, some other truth which may be not less essential, but the imperfect workings of which may have obscured its quality. The solid progress of humanity depends upon the incorporation of *all* truth into its life. The fundamental truth of religion, which has amply, if often distortedly, expressed itself in past history, cannot be absent from any stable civilization of the future.

That is to say, human progress, to be secure, must retain the full recognition of the dignified quality of our nature and of our close relation with the supreme Source of all life and force. Underlying all that we do for mankind, there must be a noble conception of manhood, or the work cannot

be of an elevated and inspiring strain. The philanthropist, the social reformer, is very apt to be so possessed by his particular thought that his work loses dignity and vitality. Love must still be balanced by faith, the desire for men's welfare by a sense of the nobility of their nature and their destiny, or philanthropic work will be narrow, shallow, worldly, tiresome. A materialistic civilization could have, in my judgment, no chance whatever of stability, much less of progress.

Thus we require, in our motive, that balanced union of the two great principles which were actually (as I said at the outset) contained in the thought of Jesus. Love, altruism, the one; an ideal, the sense of man's high origin, his dignity, his possibilities, the other.

And these two, united for practical influence, cannot be better expressed than in the Hebrew reformer's striking phrase,—the reign of God in human life, the kingdom of heaven on earth.

It is because we are children of God, because our nature is of the same eternal quality as His, that we may reverence ourselves, and confide that no work for the amelioration of the condition of humanity can be wasted or lost.

It is the sense that, in our work for men, we are only the agents and vehicles of the infinite forces of God, which makes us equal, eternally, to all demands on our courage and patience.